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Catalogues: albums, inventories and echoes

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Dan Graham : *œuvres 1965-2000*, Paris : Paris-Musées, 2001

Yayoi Kusama, Paris : Les Presses du réel, 2001

Michelangelo Pistoletto : *continenti di tempo = continents du temps*, Lyon : Musée d'art contemporain ; Paris : Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2001

- 1 In the preceding issue of *Critique d'art*, Glòria Picazo took a caustic look at the copious production of catalogues showcasing the collections of public institutions, while Eric Troncy seemed to regret the “average and necessarily anonymous taste” that, in his view, typifies today’s curators and critics. This time, with the simultaneous publication of major books on Dan Graham, Yayoi Kusama and Michelangelo Pistoletto, the coincidences of the calendar prompt thoughts about this kind of “retrospective” catalogue, as we might call it, and on the choices it reflects. This kind of book differs from the *catalogue raisonné* in that seeks to offer a good idea of the work done by the artist *up to* the time of its publication. In the process, it raises two not insignificant questions: 1. What can this kind of catalogue show us and write about when the artist concerned does mainly performances (Yayoi Kusama) or designs pieces that are not intended for the museum (Dan Graham)? 2. How should it go about showing and discussing ambitious installations and their various recreations and reactualisations (Michelangelo Pistoletto)?
- 2 After transforming some of her visual hallucinations into proliferating motifs, like the spots with which she has covered objects, sculptures, installations and human bodies, the Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama went on to dream up her *Body Festival, Naked Happenings* and

Orgy of Nudity, Love, Sex & Beauty. The titles of these events from the 1960s and '70s clearly express the tremendous store she set by the liberating power of the body and of nudity. And it would seem that, in her retrospective catalogue, she has sought to use photography to convey the nature of these events and, more generally, the life she has devoted to art. For what this book shows are essentially full-page shots of her provocative actions and mirror installations as well, in the same format, as reproductions of her invitations, magazine articles about her, clothes from the "Kusama Fashion" line, and so on. And thus reading this book comes down to leafing curiously and nostalgically through a photo album that lays out Kusama's journey through time: "So, this is what that close past we never knew was like."

- 3 The Dan Graham catalogue reflects a very different approach, since it consists mainly of a chronological presentation of his projects and texts from 1965 to 2000, in order of exhibition or publication: so-called conceptual works, essays, films, performances, video installations, and "mirror spaces" followed by "houses" and architectural models. Unlike the one put together for the Kusama catalogue, the sequence here is not visual but mainly documentary (photographs, technical, historical and bibliographic information, etc.). But when we look at this documentation and read straight through Graham's own texts and interviews about his work, we are in for a few surprises. In addition to the critique of art, the analyst of viewers' behaviour, the critique of life in the American suburbs, we also discover a rock fanatic whom we could only glimpse in *Rock My Religion*. Here is a Dan Graham tempted by "parody entertainment", following the model provided, in his own terms, by John Lennon. And a keen astrologer who can predict the future of his friends on the basis of their star sign. The least that can be said is that all this rather blurs the somewhat austere and rigorous image that we sometimes get of this artist.
- 4 We could call Kusama's catalogue a "catalogue-as-album", Graham's a "catalogue-as-inventory" and Pistoletto's a "catalogue-as-echo". For Pistoletto's tome does in fact reprise or echo the principle of the exhibition itself by placing at its centre the artist's older works and framing them with these same works seen in new exhibitions, or transformed, as well as with new works. This corresponds to the rooms in the museum at Lyon, which visitors visited twice in a spiralling pattern. Thus the catalogue cleverly avoids the almost invariably limited, single perspective we have on the works and succeeds in conveying the incessant transformations that Pistoletto makes his pieces undergo over the years.
- 5 In fact, these three retrospective catalogues are designed to meet different objectives. The catalogue-as-album seeks to make visible (especially things that can no longer be seen: performances, actions, past time); the catalogue-as-inventory seeks to make comprehensible (the artist's principles and intentions) and the catalogue-as-echo aims to almost totally immerse the reader in the artist's world. At the same time, all three respond to the recently formulated requirements concerning exhibition catalogues: each, in its own way, seeks to establish the facts. In this respect, these three books are very successful: attractively designed, richly informative and not always as expected (see, for example, the interviews with Graham's friends from Sonic Youth, Tim Gordon and Thurston Moore, in his catalogue), they speak effectively about the artists' work and make us want to know them better. Indeed, young artists will certainly have taken an interest, attracted as they are by the kaleidoscope of anything but "formalist" concerns expressed by these figures. The only reservation I have about these big books is the following: they lack some kind of synthesis of their often unprocessed material. In

contrast to what you would have seen ten or twenty years ago, here information is given priority over interpretation: you are given the archives, but not the history—a history that needs to have a name put to it. What is more, the archive often stands in for history, even though the person who built this archive-cum-history, although without stating as much, is the artist. In this regard, it is worth reading the very interesting text by Christian Besson which concludes the equally fascinating book of Bernar Venet's writings and interviews. Here Besson studies the way in which Venet has constructed his own artist's itinerary. One particularly interesting example shows how photographs and accounts belatedly brought to light a performance that is described as foundational, but of which there is not the slightest trace in the first commentaries and chronologies concerning his work. This transformation of (sometimes disparate) facts into true events is also what retrospective catalogues do. They bring out facets of the artist's work that were previously neglected or considered minor (designing clothes, rock operas, writing, etc.), as the visual artist ceases to be primarily that and is considered instead as an all round creative type. So, the art of the '60s and '70s: fashion, rock and words?